

Afro-American Folklife Scholarship: A Case Study of the Sea Islands

by Charles Joyner

The Gullah-speaking people of the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands are tradition-bearers of a distinctive folk culture. Created from African traditions and American circumstances, this culture allowed them not only to endure the collective tragedy of slavery but also to bequeath a notable and enduring heritage to posterity.

Public interest in the folk culture of the Sea Islands predated formation of the American Folklore Society (1888) by more than two decades. Popular interest in the Sea Islands had been stimulated by articles in *Atlantic Monthly* in the mid-1860s, and the first major field collection of American folk songs to be published was *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), a compendium of Afro-American spirituals. Of the 130 songs in the volume, half were collected on St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

It was not until the American Folklore Society was organized, however, that scholarship on Sea Island folklore began in earnest. Within a few years, studies of folk tales, spirituals, sermons and funeral customs were published. Especially noteworthy were H. C. Bolton's 1891 article on grave decoration in the new *Journal of American Folk-Lore* and A. M. H. Christensen's publication of her *Afro-American Folk-Lore Told 'Round Cabin Fires in the Sea Islands of South Carolina* in 1892.

While the first two decades of this century were almost barren of folklore scholarship in the Sea Islands, the 1920s witnessed another surge of research. In particular, work centered around questions of the origins of spirituals and of Gullah, the Creole language of the Sea Islands and adjacent coastal region. The national controversy over spirituals was echoed in Sea Island scholarship. In *St. Helena Island Spirituals* (1925), Nicholas George Julius Ballanta-Taylor, a native of Sierra Leone, claimed African origins for Afro-American spirituals. Taking a different view, Guy B. Johnson later argued in his *Folk Culture on St. Helena Island, South Carolina* (1930) that Black spirituals exemplified selective borrowings from White folk hymnody.

For the most part, Sea Island folklorists were content simply to compile large collections of lore without drawing conclusions from them. Lydia Parrish published *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (1942), and Elsie Clews Parsons published *Folk-Lore of the Sea Islands* (1923) off South Carolina. Parsons refrained from inferences, but her careful annotations showed the remark-

able similarity of the material she collected to African folklore.

The scholarship of Gullah speech followed a similar course. Ambrose Elliott Gonzales in *The Black Border* (1922) and Reed Smith in *Gullah* (1926) argued that the speech of Black Sea Islanders was the imperfect result of the attempt of "savage and primitive" people to acquire the complex language of a more "highly civilized" race. Lorenzo Dow Turner, on the other hand, suggested in his *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949) that thousands of African words persisted in Gullah, most of them not used in the presence of Whites.

The University of North Carolina conducted a major field research project on St. Helena Island in 1929, just before the first bridge to the mainland was built. Chapel Hill scholar Guy B. Johnson, an early champion of racial equality, did not share the patronizing attitudes of Bennett, Gonzales and Smith. Nevertheless he echoed their assumption of British origins of Afro-American folk culture in his *Folk Culture on St. Helena Island* (1930). "The Negro's almost complete loss of African linguistic heritages is startling at first glance," he wrote, "but slavery as practiced in the United States made any other outcome impossible." On the Sea Islands, he argued, Blacks assumed the English of the Whites with whom they associated. Gullah grammar, in his opinion, was "merely simplified English grammar." As for the spirituals, he declared their general pattern and much of the style to be borrowed from White folk music.

A watershed study in Sea Island culture was *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, published in 1940 by the Savannah Unit of the Federal Writers Project under the leadership of Mary Granger. Stereotypical images depicted in such popular literature as *Gone With the Wind* did not prepare Americans for the real-life conditions of Black Georgians presented in *Drums and Shadows* of families with yearly incomes of less than two hundred dollars, living in houses with leaky tin roofs and lacking window screens or glass.

A year before publication of Melville J. Herskovits's important *Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), Granger and her associates annotated hundreds of Africanisms in Black tradition in the Georgia Sea Islands and adjacent coastal region. In her introduction to *Drums and Shad-*



Katie Brown of Sapelo Island, with mortar and pestle. This image is one of forty photographs published in *Drums and Shadows* (1940) portraying Sea Island inhabitants, their lifestyles, material culture and occupations during the 1930s. Photo by Malcolm and Muriel Bell, courtesy Malcolm and Muriel Bell

ows, Granger noted the renewal and exchange of native ceremonies and customs when plantations were populated. This continual development was simply intensified by isolation.

One of the oldest Sea Islanders interviewed in the 1930s was Katie Brown. In her native Gullah she recalled the foodways of her grandmother:

She make funny flat cake she call 'saraka.' She make um same day ebry yeah, and it big day. Wen dey finish, she call us in, all duh chillun, an put in hans lill flat cake an we eats it. Yes'm, I membuh how she make it. She wash rice, and po off all duh watuh. She let wet rice sit all night, an in mawnin rice is all swell. She tak dat rice an put it in wooden mawtuh, an beat it tuh paste wid wooden pestle. She add honey, sometime shuguh, and make it in flat cake wid uh hans. 'Saraka' she call um. (Granger, p. 162)

In front of Katie Brown's cabin stood just such a crude wooden mortar, constructed by her husband from a log.

Drums and Shadows set a new standard for a more realistic and less patronizing approach to its subjects; in its production Granger received the active encouragement of advisors Sterling Brown, Melville Herskovits and Guy B. Johnson. Johnson in particular, although skeptical of Granger's interpretation, ardently championed the Savannah Unit's search for Africanisms in the Sea Islands. *Drums and Shadows* presented the evidence and eschewed theoretical pronouncements. It remained for Herskovits's student, William R. Bascom, to publish an article, "Acculturation among the Gullah Negroes," in *American Anthropologist* (1941) in which he developed theoretical issues raised by the information presented in Granger's seminal work.

The next generation produced little scholarship on the Sea Islands with the exception of Guy and Candie Carawan's activist *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life? The People of Johns Island, South Carolina* (1966). Texts collected in the 1960s demonstrate that links with the traditions of past generations remained strong:

We doesn't go to no doctor. My daddy used to cook medicine – herbs medicine: seamuckle, pine top, lison molasses, shoemaker root, ground moss, peachtree leaf, big-root, blood-root, red oak bark, terrywuk.

... All this from old people time when they hardly been any doctor. People couldn't afford doctor, so they had to have and guess. Those old people dead out now, but they worked their own remedy and their own remedy come out good. (Carawan, p. 45)

In the 1960s, Johns Island residents such as Janie Hunter recognized changes in their lifestyle but noted

the desire of young and old alike to preserve the knowledge of past generations:

I tell you, young people got a lot chance to think more in their age than I had to think in my days. 'Cause I couldn't think 'bout nothing but plant peas and corn in my days. But now these children got so much different thing to go through and learn, and they got nice schools. If they don't learn, it's nobody's fault but their own. Then I try to teach them these stories and different song and let them know what blues was like in my days coming up. My children like it. They sit down and they want me to talk about the past. They enjoy hearing it. I want them to know about it, so when I gone there be somebody to carry it on.
(Carawan, p. 72)

An extraordinary resurgence of Sea Island scholarship began in the 1970s and 1980s, when scholars narrowed their focus and probed more deeply. Noteworthy work on Gullah material culture included John Michael Vlach's, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (1978) and his study of wrought-ironworker Philip Simmons, *Charleston Blacksmith* (1981), as well as Dale Rosengarten's investigation and exhibit of lowcountry coiled basketmakers, *Row upon Row* (1986), for the McKissick Museum in Columbia, South Carolina. Beyond published works emerged a flood of doctoral dissertations ranging in subject from African retentions in Gullah culture, continuity and change in Sea Island music and Black women basketmakers, to the islanders' peace-keeping mechanisms, parental discipline, folk medicine, the meaning of plantation "membership" and even the impact of television on traditional culture in the Sea Islands. Linguistics dissertations were important in advancing the understanding of Gullah beyond the narrow ethnocentric view of previous generations. Collectively they demonstrated that Gullah is not a dialect but a creole language – exemplifying not divergence from English but the convergence of various African and European linguistic influences. The basic lexicon of Gullah was acknowledged to be English, but the syntax – the appropriate way of using the lexicon to generate meaning – was shown to be largely African.

In my own *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (1984), I build upon the concept of the creolization of language – a process by which various linguistic strains converge to create a new, creole language – to examine broader questions. I examine transformation of various African folk-cultural elements into a new, creole Afro-American folk culture with distinctive work patterns, material culture, folk beliefs and verbal and musical arts. More recently, Patricia Jones-Jackson's *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands* (1987) represents a special contribution to Sea Island scholarship. Although not native to Sea Island culture, this gifted scholar enjoyed a close personal



Alfred Graham, the first teacher of basketry at Penn School on St. Helena Island, brought the craft with him when he came from Africa as a boy. He is shown here with his grandson in 1909. Basketry, one of the oldest crafts of African origin to be brought to the United States, has played an important and enduring role in the region. The photograph was taken by Leigh Richmond Miner who documented St. Helena Island life at the turn of the century. Miner's original glass plates were discovered in the 1960s and published in 1971 in *Face of an Island* edited by Edith M. Dabbs. Photo from the Penn School Historical Collection, permission granted by Penn Center, Inc., St. Helena Island, South Carolina. Print courtesy Penn School Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill



"Miss Myma" (Aneatha Brisbane), Patricia Jones-Jackson's closest personal link to the Sea Islands community, to whom her book *When Roots Die* is dedicated. During field trips to the area, Jones-Jackson resided with "Miss Myma" who adopted the folklorist as her "granddaughter." Photo by Patricia Jones-Jackson, reproduced by permission of the University of Georgia Press from *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions of the Sea Islands*, by Patricia Jones-Jackson, copyright 1987.

relationship to the people she studied. "Miss Myma" (Aneatha Brisbane), a community member who befriended her and introduced her to the ways of the Sea Island Community, once visited Jones-Jackson's Michigan home. Sitting before the fireplace, Miss Myma shared tales of Ber Rabbit with Jones-Jackson's two small children, passing on to them an oral tradition which could not have been matched by a lifetime of exposure to written literature.

Jones-Jackson was tragically killed in an automobile accident on Johns Island in the summer of 1986 while

engaged in fieldwork. Her posthumous book examines relations between language, storytelling and environment on the contemporary Sea Islands, where traditional culture is threatened by such large-scale resort development as that occurring at nearby Hilton Head. Jones-Jackson's work and that of a new cadre of concerned community members, environmental and cultural conservators, state cultural programmers and scholars suggest that folklife study and cultural conservation have inseparably interwoven scholarly and folk traditions.

Charles Joyner, a native of the South Carolina coastal region, is Burroughs Professor of History at the University of South Carolina, Coastal Carolina College. His *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* won the 1987 National University Press Book Award. In addition to his fieldwork in the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands and lowcountry he has recorded singers and musicians in the Appalachians, the Ozarks, the British Isles and Newfoundland.

Suggested reading

Carawan, Guy and Candie. *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life? The People of Johns Island, South Carolina*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1988 [New York: Simon and Shuster, 1966].

Granger, Mary, ed. *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986 [1940].

Jones, Bessie and Bess Lomax Hawes. *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1985 [New York: Harper and Row, 1972].

Jones-Jackson, Patricia. *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987.

Joyner, Charles. *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984.

Suggested recordings

Georgia Sea Islands Songs (New World NW, 278).

Bessie Jones, *So Glad I'm Here* (Rounder, 2015).

_____, *Step It Down* (Rounder, 8004).

_____, *Georgia Sea Islands*, Volume II, Southern Journey Series (Prestige/International, 25002).

McIntosh County Shouters, *Georgia Slave Songs* (Folkways, 4344).

Moving Star Hall Singers, *Sea Island Folk Festival* (Folkways FS, 3841).

_____, *Been in the Storm So Long* (Folkways FS, 3842).

Suggested film

Gullah Tales, by Gary Moss. 29 min. color, 16 mm., or videotape. Georgia Endowment for the Humanities, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.